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STRANGE TALES

FROM HUMBLE LIFE,

BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

THE  
BIBLE WOMAN.

PUBLISHED BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

PHILADELPHIA:

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## NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

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THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

*Rochdale, 1866.*

## The Bible Woman.

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My first walk over the new bridge or viaduct that spans Farringdon street, London, will always remain associated with a scene I witnessed that day. That energetic lady, the authoress of "The Missing Link," despatched a messenger to my temporary residence in London requesting me to meet her staff of Bible-women. The hour being fixed, she, with her principal assistants and the two hundred and twenty Scripture readers, all assembled in their room in Parker Street, Little Queen Street, Holborn. My orders were to speak to them one hour and a quarter, then allow myself to be questioned thirty minutes on matters bearing on their special work. Those two anxious hours will never be forgotten. I felt my responsibility as I looked on that gathering of messengers of love, those centres of circles, and ambassadors of heaven, who, in the name of Jehovah, were laying moral siege to the world's great capital, exercising an influence that would reach to every continent, bless unborn thousands, and vibrate through all time.

While trying to accomplish their mighty purpose, they were sounding no trumpet, but simply

carrying in their hands a book that contains the the purest morality, the soundest philosophy, the safest politics, the truest history ; that teaches the sublimest poetry, the grandest oratory, the profoundest wisdom, and the wisest laws ; that reveals the deepest love, the widest sympathy, the greatest benevolence, and the holiest lives ; that tells of every human experience from the highest felicity to the deepest misery ; that leads to the Hand that soothes every possible sorrow, and gives every possible joy ; that secures the sweetest peace, the greatest happiness, the brightest hopes in this world, and points the way to everlasting bliss in the world to come. Of this Book it may be truly said,—

All glittering pearls of every sea,  
All gold and gems that earth hath given.  
Come far below the worth of Thee,  
Thou priceless blessed gift of heaven.

This Book, with faith in its divine author, a heart-felt conviction of its amazing power, is the only weapon of their warfare. They know that it is the sword of the Spirit, “and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart ;” and they know that God says, “My word shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please.” It teaches them to do good to

all irrespective of creed, colour, sect or party, and not to be weary in well-doing, for in due season they shall reap if they faint not.

And what a work! and what a field! Nothing but humble love to God, boundless zeal, unbending faith, and a burning desire for the salvation of souls could nerve them for the undertaking, or give them any hope of producing much effect on the mighty masses of London. But these workers have all read of Jonah's visit to Nineveh, and Gideon's barley cake.

That great cities are great centres of influence and great powers for good or evil all history amply testifies; for much of history consists in recording the doings of these great centres—New York, St. Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, London. These are all names of great import, and all in turn shake the world; but London, the very thought of what it now is, and what it probably will be, seems to stagger the mind. It has twelve thousand streets, and one hundred and twenty miles of land are required to hold its three millions of a population—a population consisting of every people, nation, and tongue. More of Scotch than in Edinburgh; more of Irish than in Dublin; three times as many Romanists as in Rome; and more Jews than in all the land of Canaan; besides six thousand Italians, thirty thousand French, sixty thousand Germans, and many



of all other nations. So densely are they packed together that one hundred and forty thousand live on every square mile. These require for their daily movements one hundred steamers, fifteen hundred omnibusses, and five thousand cabs, besides several thousand trains overground and underground. It has seven hundred and fifty Protestant churches and chapels, in addition to Sunday and day-schools conducted by ministers, teachers, and missionaries, all trying to do good. But our official documents tell us that we have twenty thousand beer and tobacco houses open every Sabbath, and these drinking houses are the hot-beds of crime and misery. We have sixteen thousand children trained to crime ; five thousand receivers of stolen goods ; thirty thousand drunkards ; fifteen thousand gamblers ; twenty-five thousand beggars ; one hundred and ten thousand subsisting on profligacy ; and twenty thousand thieves. These are the wicked influences at work, spreading every possible evil, and working day and night to counteract all good. In London the power of light and darkness contend with amazing force. Looking at this mighty city from a moral or spiritual point, and calmly reflecting on the present and future of these congregated millions, it would be difficult to behold the city without weeping over it. Horace Mann, the official agent for the census of 1860, tells us that one

million in all social conditions of life--rich as well as poor, intellectual and ignorant—could not be reckoned in any kind of religious census. Could these be formed into a separate community, there would not be amongst them one church or chapel, one minister or missionary, one hymn-book or Bible. Dram-shops, theatres, and gaols would crowd every street, and send up a cry to heaven like the cry of Sodom.

Every form of sin is contagious and debasing, and is sure to produce immediate or ultimate misery. Education, mental culture, intellectual attainments can do much, and have done much : but it is only rendering less turbulent, or diverting the course of an impure stream, or pruning the branches of an evil tree ; the root and the fountains it cannot change. There is but one real remedy. We know that this remedy was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness ; and many who are neither Jews nor Greeks still deride and despise it. Nevertheless salvation by faith in Christ still remains the wisdom of God and the power of God, and the only true antidote to this world's ills.

It was a firm conviction of this truth that nerved all the apostles for their work, that still sustains all true Christian action, and which sends out this band of valiant Bible-women to cope with every form of sin ; not to “ encompass sea and

land to make one proselyte," not to teach the special dogma of any particular church : with them, "Thus saith the Lord," is everything. The precious words of the blessed Master are first and foremost, and thus they become the true auxiliaries of all Christian Churches. They are in deed and in truth in every respect Messengers of Mercy.

Let us go with Mary, one of the Bible-women, on a few visits. Mary, in her person, is neat and clean ; she carries a bag containing her Bible, a few little picture cards, and hymns for little folks. In the street the rough, ragged, gutter children that are romping, shouting, and playing, salute her as she passes through their midst ; many rows of white teeth are visible behind dangling hair and treacle lips ; many a soiled limb is peering through slits and gaps in frocks and trowsers ; yet amongst these tatterdemalions, judging from their smiles and courtesies, she is evidently a great favorite. Mary has one special object in a back court. On knocking at the door of a small cottage, she waits a moment for a response from within ; she then gently opens the door, and advancing to the foot of the stairs again knocks. A feeble voice enquires,—

"Who is there, please ?"

"It is I, my dear ; shall I come up ?" Mary replied.

"Oh, yes, do ; I am all alone. How I have



wished you would come," said the feeble voice.

Mary, first looking at her shoes to see that they were quite clean, and then shutting the street door, ascended the steps, and instantly two loving hands were locked together.

"Oh, how welcome you are! What could I do without your kind visits? You are my angel, I am sure you are."

"I think I am not much of an angel, and if you lived with me every day you would soon find that out. What about your father to-day? Is he sober yet?"

"Oh, no. I do hope he will not come while you are here. He gets more irritable and violent every day; his swearing pains me much."

"Does he know of your Bible yet?"

"No I think not; the moment I hear him come I push it under the flock bed, just under my left shoulder; he cannot see it there without removing the bed. Oh, how precious to me are its words. While reading the thirty-fourth Psalm this morning, my soul was so full of thankfulness that I wept for joy. I have no sad lonely hours now; God's promises make me very happy, and Jesus is more and more precious every day."

Just at this moment the half drunken father dashes open the house door, staggers to the bottom of the stairs, and roars out,—

"I understand there is some one up these stairs

besides my daughter; come down this minute, or I will cleave your head with this axe; you are not of my religion. Do you hear? Come down, I say, and make haste."

The invalid daughter grows pale and tremulous. Mary lays her hand on her forehead and implores a blessing on her sick friend, then steps down stairs and finds the mad parent standing at the bottom with eyes glaring like a tiger, and the axe in his hand. Mary looked him in the face with a look of kindness and firmness; neither of them spoke for a minute. He then lays down the axe, sits down on the step, but again growls out,—

"You are none of my religion. Why do you come here?"

"There is only one way to Heaven, my good man; and Christ tells us He is the way, and all that are in the way to Heaven love Christ, and love each other. Your poor sick Kate loves Jesus, and so do I, and she wishes me to come and tell her about His goodness and love to sinners, and I wish you would let me come and not be cross with us. Pray, do."

The man was not utterly without feeling, and the words, "Your poor sick Kate," touched a chord. He stroked the back of his hand over his eyes, and stammered out,—

"I know of the Bible; I know of the Bible.

You may come again when you will, and read to Kate."

Those words, those unexpected words, were heard by the anxious, trembling Kate, and she called out,—

"Oh, father, thank you for that, and God bless you, father."

Mary's next place of call was to see a woman called Ruth, one who had given her much concern. On entering this house—and a very dirty house—a pale child sat in a low chair, with a younger one rolling on the floor beside her. There was no fender to keep back the cinders, no other seat except a short form. On this bench Mary sat down, and was just beginning to talk with the children, when the mother came in, looking much confused, and began at once to say, —

"You have called to see us; and I suppose you will have heard that I am down again, and it is quite true, and I do not know what must be done. I did think I had got stronger, and that I should never taste another drop, for I cannot taste it without going mad for more. I was boasting how much better, and how much more happy we all were since I became an abstainer, on the morning of the very day I went wrong. I had gone out to buy two pennyworth of black currant preserves, to make a taste for

the dear sickly child beside you, for I feared she was dying. The dazzling dram shop lay in my way, the longing came again, and I could not resist, but went in and spent the twopence in gin; then pawned the dress I bought and made at the Mothers' Meeting, and spent all in gin; and now I am clean gone. There seems no hope left for me, for I did wish to be good, and I tried hard to be good; but I cannot, no, I cannot; you had better give me up."

"Did your husband keep sober while you did?" asked Mary.

"Yes, and he read the Bible, and went to the evening preaching. He longed for a drop, as I did, but we encouraged each other to be hard and stood fast. I gave in; he went worse than me, and seemed madder than ever. You had better give us both up."

"No, Ruth; I cannot give you up. It is painful to have all my bright hopes so blighted; but I cannot give you up. I will pray for you, and bear with you. I see where you have missed it. When you went for the currants, and saw the dazzling dram shop, and felt the intense longing for drink return, you should have instantly said, 'Lord, help me; Lord, help me; Lord, help me.' You wanted strength to resist the strong temptation, but your own strength was not sufficient, nor ever will be.

You know the words I have often read to you about the Bible saints trusting in God, and how one said, 'God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble' The best Christian in the world would fall if he had not the arm of God to lean upon; and then we become strong, but it is the strength of God. And then God tells us to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves, for even Christ pleased not Himself, but sought the good of others. No, Ruth, I cannot give you up. God can save you; and I hope that He soon will save you, and that you will yet be a happy family."

Mary next stands amongst the children of one of our Ragged Schools. She sees one little fellow very poorly clad, his eyes red with weeping. Mary puts her hand on his head, and asks the cause of his sorrow. Tears gush forth afresh, and he replies,—

"Please, my mother is very poorly; I think she is dying."

"Dying, child! and who is taking care of your mother?"

"Please, no one but my little brother," responded the child.

"Come, show me where you live, my dear; I must see your mother."

The boy puts on his greasy, ragged cap, and



still weeping, leads the way down several steps into a dark, damp, miserable cellar ; and there, on a wretched, filthy bed of straw, with no attendant but the child, lay the suffering, expiring mother. All possible help was instantly obtained, but all too late ; the spirit of the humble sufferer passed away to other climes, but told not where. Oh, how many scenes like this have been witnessed by our town missionaries and our Bible-women.

Mary, assisted by a few kindred spirits, washed the wasted dead body, burned the rotten bed, and accompanied the sobbing and now orphan boys to see their lost parent laid in a pauper's grave. But the work was not yet done ; the heart of the woman and the Christian yearned over the desolate condition of the friendless children. She cared for them body and soul, and in the spirit of her Master sought their welfare before her own. She feared that if they were left to drift amongst the moral breakers, or get entangled in the whirlpools of sin, that their ruin would be certain and speedy ; and she, with many prayers that God would bless the deed, took them to her own home, obtained for them employment, and now they are surrounded with circumstances favorable to their becoming respectable, useful members of society, and very probably happy young Chris-

tians. Indeed, it is impossible to tell the blessings—temporal and spiritual—that may fall to the lot of these two orphan boys, from the unselfish Christian act of this Bible-woman.

But we will go to just one more place with Mary and her book. This time it is down five steps, and the person anxious to see her is a man,—once a fine, handsome, strong-built master of a notable house; a daring gambler, and a well-known betting man. But he is now reaping what he has sown, as we all must; health, strength, money, character all gone, and his fine, powerful frame reduced to almost helpless weakness. Mary has been down those steps before, and the now penitent gambler and giant, sitting up in an old low arm-chair, makes her very welcome. She has often read to him out of the holy Book, which, in his pompous, blustering, vigorous health, when in the ring or on the turf, he mocked and despised; but now it is precious, very precious, and he says,—

“I am truly thankful that God did not cut me down in my sin. Death in all forms has made havoc amongst my companions; many have been killed, some have died raving mad from drink, and those still left are very wicked. It now seems strange to me that people should be so reckless and careless respecting the most important thing. Oh that I had seen things in

my young days as I see them now; my life would have been spent in doing good. God is indeed merciful to me, in giving me time to repent. But may I ask, is the Bible you lent me lent or given?"

"Given, sir, and given with great pleasure," replied Mary.

"Thank you much. Oh, how I do love it; I have read it again and again, almost every day; every word is precious; it is all the property I now have. I will write my son's name in it, and leave it to him as his father's last gift. It will be a great blessing to him if he makes it his guide."

We now take leave of the happy invalid in the chamber; the poor, repentant Ruth, who had again, like thousands of women in and out of London, stumbled at the door of the dazzling dram shop; the publican saved at last; and the two orphan boys; and sit with Mary one hour amongst the mothers that weekly meet in her district, to talk about household economy and the training of children; to sew and sing, and read and pray, and rejoicing that hope dawns for them at last; that the blackness and gloom so long darkening their homes is giving way to a clearer sky, and light and sunshine coming down from heaven to illuminate their way; for they find, as all who humbly read will find, that

the Book of God is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path.

If what we have now described of a few days' work of one of the two hundred and twenty Bible-women be an evidence of good being done, what must be the result of the labor of all these unpretending, silent messengers of truth and love ! Oh, the omnipotence of love, of love emanating from Him who is the source of all goodness, all benevolence, all sympathy, all charity, whose love brought Him down to save a perishing world. Such love knows no defeat. "It suffereth long and is kind ; it envieth not . vaunteth not itself ; is not puffed up ; is not easily provoked ; thinketh no evil ; rejoiceth in the truth ; beareth, believeth, hopeth, and endureth all things ; it never fails."

What a mercy for London ; what a mercy to mankind, that we have our earnest ministers, missionaries, Sunday-school teachers, and our Bible-women. It is this mighty leavening influence that keeps back the rolling waves of iniquity ; it is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We read little about this work in the "Times," the "Telegraph," the "Daily News," or the "Standard." A divorce case, an Old Bailey trial, the Derby, or a boat race, would receive more attention than all the May meetings of Exeter Hall, or all the missionary

operations in the kingdom. Well, the kingdom of God cometh not by observation; the humble toilers, the real, true, effectual workers for Jesus; the heart and soul of real good are often working in obscurity; in garrets, cellars, and prisons; amidst crime, filth, fever, and pestilence; giving in many cases bread to the famished, starving body, and in all cases the Word of God, which is bread to the perishing soul. They hear the last word, witness the last sigh, and behold the last look of many who pass away in silence and obscurity, having no other earthly friend. There are thousands of such, who to hear the cry, "What must I do to be saved?" or to see a tear of penitence in the eye of the returning prodigal, would receive more real joy than all the flattery and praise the world could give; and amongst these humble followers of Christ will be found the loving, plodding, patient BIBLE WOMAN.



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